

Jackson Sun

Legal Services dispense advice to tornado victims

By Tajuana Cheshier

June 29, 2003

Victims of last month's tornado brought their frustrations and dwindling patience to the staff of West Tennessee Legal Services who were waiting with an open ear and words of wisdom to help them through.

"We want people to have access to justice," said Linda Warren-Seely, Director Pro Bono services. "People responded very well to the large session and I believe it was beneficial to everyone."

About 50 people, some carrying armfuls of paperwork accumulated from insurance companies and contractors, attended the seminar held at Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church on Saturday.

"I wanted them to know what I've done so far," said Frances March, who has lived in her Cloverdale Street residence for 10 years. "There's a lot that needs to be done and I've received a check from my insurance company but I haven't spent it."

March is waiting on estimates from contractors and advice on whether or not she should seek more assistance.

"Things aren't easy for me right now," March said. "I'm only working part-time and some of my bills are asking for more money."

Seely urged residents to retain their dignity, hold onto all of their documents and don't take the insurance company's practices personally.

"Their job is try and retain their money but residents need to feel empowered and equipped with all of the right information," Seely said.

Peabody Street resident Teresa Anderson has lived in her neighborhood for 19 years and disagrees with her insurance company's approach to repairing her home.

"They want to patch everything up," Anderson said. "I don't think they would patch up their houses. I think they're just trying to take advantage."

Assisting residents in the East Jackson community was a goal for West Tennessee Legal Services, a small firm that serves 17 West Tennessee counties with a staff of 46 people. Eight are actual attorneys.

"In most cases we're talking about an underserved segment of our community, East Jackson," said Carl Seely, an attorney. "Unfortunately more often people from this area are more vulnerable to consumer fraud practices."

After a group question and answer session, many people received one-on-one consultation with volunteers.

"I hope to get some answers about the kind of assistance I can receive from FEMA," said Tempie Hudson, who lives on Iselin Street. Her home received foundation damage and is unlivable.

Diann Austin and her mother wanted advice on how to get a response from an insurance company.

"Our patience is running out because of all of the waiting around," Austin said. "We had homeowner's insurance but they haven't done anything yet."

Saturday's session will not be the last of free legal advice for tornado victims.

"We're not sure of the next scheduled one but we know it will be necessary because this is a process," said Linda Warren-Seely. "Once we get a response from insurance companies then we'll have to deal with contractor issues."

West Tennessee Legal Services provided legal counseling for tornado victims in 1999 as well.